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TRANSCRIPT OF SPECIAL NEWS BRIEFING
ON GAYANA
BY JOHN BUSHNELL
DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR INTER-AMERICAN AFFAIRS
WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 1978

MR. BUSHNELL: Thank you, Hodding.

Maybe we can be faster than we have been in previous days. I will go over first the situation on the ground, then I'll cover the present plans for handling the remains, and then take questions on any of the aspects.

We have, since the last briefing 24 hours ago, been proceeding very rapidly with the build-up of our equipment and expertise in the country. We have had a plane arriving in Georgetown about every two hours over the last 24 hours. That is continuing. Three Jolly Green Giants, the big H-53 helicopters, will be arriving in another hour or hour-and-a-half. They are flying in with aerial refueling. Fresh crews have been flown in so they will be immediately able to place those helicopters in operation on their arrival.

The 28-man U.S. Graves Registration Team arrived overnight in Georgetown and was flown into Jonestown the very first thing this morning. They have been working with the full cooperation of the Guyanese Government in preparing the dead for return to the United States.

The efforts to establish a base of operation at Matthews Ridge are already well advanced. Fuel is being flown up to operate helicopters from there; and that base will, within another couple of hours, be fully established. So the whole effort is finally geared up and being able to have an effect on the ground.

The shipment of bodies from Jonestown to Georgetown, about 120 miles away, will be by helicopter; and we expect that this will begin late this afternoon when those heavy helicopters get in. The bodies will then be taken from the Guyanese capital to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware for processing.

We have available C-141 aircraft to bring these bodies to the United States. It is not completely clear at this time when the first planeload of bodies will leave Georgetown. If everything goes very well -- meaning that the Graves Registration Team has made enough progress that 80 to 100 bodies are ready when the big helicopters get in, that they can pick those up smoothly, move them down to Georgetown, where they are being placed in what are called "body bags," rubberized bags at Jonestown -- they will be flown to Georgetown in those body bags, and the whole body bag will be placed in a rigid-transfer case. These transfer cases we are flying in from all over the United States, and they will then be loaded into the aircraft. It is possible that the first aircraft would get off by sometime between 6:00 and 8:00 o'clock tonight, EST. I don't want to make any commitments on that because, obviously, a lot of things can go wrong; but something in that order would be the earliest that we can get the first planeload moving.

We would then follow tomorrow morning with a very intensive and active operation in order to bring all the bodies out now just as quickly as we possibly can. The question on time there will depend on how much work and how time-consuming it is on the bodies which have not been identified at Jonestown. About half the bodies have not yet been identified, as far as we know; and there will be a division of work between what will be done on the ground and what will be done in Dover -- we do not know exactly what that division will be -- and that will control whether we are able to get all the bodies out in the course of tomorrow or if the operation will have to extend into or through Friday.

Where we have been notified by the Guyanese authorities of the next of kin, which is about half of the bodies -- where we have been notified of identification of bodies, about half the bodies -- we are notifying next-of-kin, and are continuing to do that. That will continue to go on. We are getting a large number of calls, and I might say that we are increasing the number of consular officers that we have working upstairs. We know that the public has, at some very busy time periods, had difficulty reaching our lines and so we are setting up additional lines. For those who are interested, I will repeat the numbers to be used to reach our consular officers here. It is area code 202-632-6610 and area code 202-632-3172. Those are the two numbers for use in reaching the consular officers.

We do not intend, until firm identification has been made by our own people, to post any lists; but we will pass on the information that the Guyanese Government has made and is making available to us. To anticipate some of the questions, I would say that the cost of this operation, of recovering the bodies, of flying them out to Dover, of processing them at Dover, will be met by the U.S. Government. When the bodies are turned over to representatives of next-of-kin at Dover, they will then become the responsibility of the next-of-kin.

Perhaps I'm a little bit disjointed here; but I might add, on calling in, we would welcome more calls than we are getting of close family members of people who were in Jonestown. By next-of-kin and close family members I mean parents, siblings, spouses, children. For number of people we do not have next-of-kin identification. I don't want to invite lots of calls just from friends who may have known people, at least at this time. We may, in the course of next week as we try to reach families of the more difficult cases, be welcoming that. But given the holiday weekend, our staffs are somewhat limited; and although we are trying to maintain a team of six to a dozen people working around the clock, there are still limits to what we can do. But for the immediate family, if they have not called in and they think they have someone in Jonestown, we would appreciate a call.

I think that pretty well brings you up to date on that situation. In terms of the investigation, the Guyanese are continuing. My information is that in the last few minutes, Mr. Layton has been arrested and charged with murder. Other people are being detained as possible suspects, and may be charged in the course of today or tomorrow. The investigation is continuing in Georgetown.

Members of the Peoples Temple organization who are in Guyana have been asked by the Government at this time not to leave as they are continuing to interview them; but we do anticipate that those who have not had any involvement in this situation will be permitted to leave sometime over the next few days, if they wish to do so.

Very few additional survivors showed up yesterday in either Jonestown or elsewhere. The search of the jungle is intensifying. With the heavier helicopters, we will be able to move in more Guyanese people. The light helicopters are continuing to explore the area, but thus far we have not found significant numbers of additional survivors in the area.

Q What is the total number?

A We now have, according to our records -- and this may be off a few because of the difficulty of keeping track of various groups -- about 72 people. This consists of essentially three groups. The largest group is a group which were in Georgetown at the Peoples Temple office in Georgetown or connected with it last Saturday. They were away from the up-country camp either because they normally work away from it, or they were away from it on some special business of that day -- a few people who were away from the camp because they were running a boat down the river or were otherwise occupied away from the area of the camp.

We have a second group which consists of people who were at the airport at the time of the incident with Congressman Ryan, and who have since been identified, who did not return after that incident to the camp. And then we have some people who were at Jonestown at the time when the apparent mass suicide took place -- that is a relatively small number -- who fled from that.

Combining all those people -- and in some cases we're not very clear in which category to put individuals -- we have about 72 people identified at this time.

Q What prompted Guyana to change its mind about burial in-place?

A As I said yesterday, it was our estimate from our pathologist here that that would be the only alternative, given the health situation on the ground; and we had authorized our Ambassador to proceed with that alternative if that was the view of the Guyanese Government. The Guyanese Government, after consulting with their health and police officials who were on site, felt that they did not yet have a health hazard, and given the early arrival of the potential to remove these bodies, they asked us to please proceed in that way. That did not run against our desires, necessarily. The reason we were moving to the internment option was because of the growing health hazard, not because we didn't wish to bring the bodies back. So their assessment on the ground led them to that decision, and we are proceeding in that way.

The initial reports from our own people in the Graves Identification Team do not conflict with their own health officials assessment of the situation.

Q Mr. Bushnell, people at Defense have said that the delay caused by the change of approach, that their equipment was on the ground waiting, that they didn't know whether to put identification people on or search teams on, and that this was a decision here that cost them very valuable time in both the rescue operation and in getting people out.

A The biggest requirement that we have had in Georgetown, either for search and rescue or for getting people out, has of course been the helicopters, not the other technicians. Unfortunately, there was a delay in the Graves Identification Team yesterday -- we had hoped to get it down earlier. My understanding is that the aircraft which was going to carry them out of Fort Bragg was delayed by technical problems for about six hours. I don't believe there has been any time when we haven't wanted those technical people. There has been a certain amount of confusion, because we haven't had experienced people on the ground fully aware of the technicalities of these operations, as to exactly what sort of people were needed. The view from the State Department has been, when in doubt send both.

Q Just to follow up, you lead us to believe yesterday that you were reluctantly going along with the Guyanese Government request for internment there because of the health hazards there. Why was the State Department so willing to go along with that request when it then became apparent that it was not necessary? Why not pursue the more preferable option of having these bodies properly identified and then returned?

A I'm not sure that I follow your question. But yesterday we were heavily driven, I think, by the assessment of our own pathologists in the United States who were estimating the condition of the bodies, given the terrain and the passage of time. Apparently there were Guyanese people also talking by radio and making an estimate in Georgetown. Some of that agreed, but when their experts on the ground assessed the situation that actually existed at Jonestown, they concluded that there was time available before the health hazard became too severe to take the bodies out. On the basis of that determination, that led them to request that we take the bodies out; and of course we agreed with it since the only reason that would lead us to another conclusion would have been an unmanageable health hazard and since they are the best judges, being physically present on the ground.

I think the information I had when I was here yesterday came, in a large extent, not from people who were on the ground looking at the bodies, but from people who were estimating what their condition would be.

Q Mr. Bushnell, the Justice Department is in progress on an investigation of the violations of Federal law involving the assassination of a Congressman. Yesterday Guyanese authorities declined to admit ten FBI agens who were prepared to go down there. Are the Guyanese authorities cooperating with the one FBI agent on the spot in their current investigation? Are they passing on to him the results of their interrogation or allowing him to participate in that interrogation?

A This morning the Légal Attache from Caracas met with the Guyanese officials, met with the Guyanese police chief, investigating chief, in Georgetown. The last report I had was that he was still meeting with them, that he was cooperating in this investigation. We have made clear to the Guyanese that, as in other areas, we are prepared to provide additional assistance, technical assistance, investigative assistance to help them in Guyana; that we are prepared to follow up with necessary interviews and investigations in the United States; that the full cooperation of the FBI will be available in this case.

Until the Legal Attache who is working with them and the Guyanese officials themselves assess precisely what sort of help is needed, what sort of expertise, the Guyanese have felt that it was premature to send down a general investigative team. It is their investigation, the investigation in Guyana. They are a sovereign country, and we are not trying in any way to take it over.

I think, from the conversations that I have had and that our Ambassador has had, that there will be additional specific requests for assistance from the FBI in aspects of this investigation. The investigation is, of course, making progress as indicated by the fact that there has already been the first arrest and charge, and that we are expecting others to proceed fairly promptly.

Q If I could follow up my own question, the thrust of your reply is that the FBI is prepared to cooperate with Guyanese authority. What I asked was: Are Guyanese authorities prepared to cooperate with the FBI in their investigation?

A I think the answer is clearly yes in the fact that they are working right now with the FBI man. So not only are they prepared to cooperate, they are cooperating.

Q What is the specific murder charge? Who is Layton charged with killing?

A It is my impression -- I don't want to be absolutely definitive on this -- but I believe he is charged with killing people at the airport. Since I have not seen the charge, I do not know which specific persons he may be charged with killing.

Q If I may follow that up, what is the State Department feeling on whether extradition ought to be initiated so that Mr. Layton would be tried in this country?

A We will have to look at all the legal aspects of that question. Clearly he has committed a crime -- he is accused of committing a crime -- in Guyana. Some of the crimes he may have committed, particularly the murder of the Congressman if he is accused of that, conceivably are also crimes in the United States because of the protection of certain people.

Until we have many more details and can consult with the Guyanese in this, I think it would be premature to be addressing that issue.

It is quite conceivable -- in fact, even likely, I think -- that he is being charged in addition with the murder of individuals which would not constitute a U.S. crime.

Q Mr. Bushnell, would you have any informed speculation on the people who are still missing?

Do you believe, for example, that (a) they are mostly dead, (b) they are hiding in the jungle; or (c) that there aren't as many as we may have believed initially?

A We obviously do not know the answer to that question. There is a good deal of work that needs to be done. We have not yet completed an analysis of the names on the passports, for example, to see if that would identify certain groups -- "age groups, sex groups, and so forth -- as being missing as against the passports found in Jonestown.

It looks quite clear to me that the large figure of 1100 that we used early on is certainly more than the number of people that were in Jonestown on Saturday.

We have checked back carefully -- I have checked backed carefully -- the source of that figure. That figure was derived by the number of people who have applied to the Guyanese authorities since the beginning to migrate to Jonestown, to be migrants and to live in that area.

I suspect that a number, perhaps even a substantlal number, of that 1100, after having migrated to Jonestown, decided to leave and therefore were not there at the time of the incident.

However, we cannot really deal with the question of whether there are large numbers. It seems, since we have not at this time and the Guyanese police who are now combing the jungle areas have not found any significant number of bodies nor live people, that it is unlikely that there are large numbers who flew randomly into the jungle. We cannot rule out that there was a group which departed in an organized way to the jungle to some sort of an alternative site. That might still exist, and we haven't yet located it. But it does not seem likely that there are several hundred people now in the jungle.

We are intensifying the search this afternoon. Tomorrow we will have a very large helicopter capacity directed to this search. We will be able to help the Guyanese put a lot more people into the area, and that will clarify this issue a good deal more.

Q What do you mean by the Guyanese police not having found a significant number of bodies in the area? Have they found any?

A I believe they have found a few. I do not have a firm reading on that, and I am not sure. On the various reports that we get what the definition of where the camp ends and the jungle begins is fuzzy, so there are some bodies that have been found. Some people might say that they are in the jungle; some people might say they are at the edge of the camp. That sort of situation makes it very hard for me on that question.

Q I am asking whether these people would be included in the 409, which I believe is the last number I heard, or whether the number has increased?

A No. They are included in the count of 405, which is still the last figure that we have. They are now going through a recounting process which will help us to firm up the figure.

Q Have you ruled out the possibility that the hundreds apparently missing may have been killed before Saturday night and are in mass graves somewhere?

A I cannot completely rule out that possibility. I would note one fact, which does not rule it out but which rules out certain aspects of it. There has been a story that particularly with older people, who either died or were killed, the Jonestown operation continued to collect the Social Security checks.

I can report that our Consular Officer in January of this year personally delivered the Social Security checks to all of the people in that area eligible for them, delivering them by hand on identification of their passports -- so that, at any rate at that time, we are sure that they were alive.

Now, that was January, and I cannot absolutely rule out what might have happened since that time.

Q You mentioned about 800 to 900 passports being found and that there are 400 dead.

Are there repeated passports or old passports?

There are at least some 500 missing, at least in the numbers game.

A Well, I suspect that the passports of a number of these survivors in the various categories may well be in this group as well.

Moreover, the quick observation that our people have given me of that is that quite a lot of the passports are the old large passports and there may have been new passports issued without the old one being removed from that group.

So until we have had time to go through the passports and see if there is duplication, we really cannot deal with that issue.

Q Mr. Bushnell, can I follow up on earlier question here?

Have you learned anything from any of the people who were at Jonestown that would lead you to believe that there might be mass graves at any other site?

In other words, presumably you are questioning these people. There are quite a number of them that have survived. Have any of them indicated to you in any way that such an alternative grave site might exist?

A We have somewhat of a time lag here in that, as you can imagine, our Embassy in Guyana is a very small post. Although we have sent in some people, there is a lot of interviewing going on which they simply have time to write-up and pass up to us.

All I can say is of the reports, the several reports, that I have read and I think also the direct conversations that I have had with them -- something this significant they would tend to pass on -- I have not heard of anything involving any mass sort of execution.

Q Mr. Bushnell, it is clear from the press reports alone that this was more than just a religious cult. This was obviously a training ground for terrorist tip squads, as well as people who were involved in drugs and other -- I think that is absolutely clear from the press reports themselves, and I am sure the press reports are covering up a lot of other things. I have several questions in regard to that.

First of all, is Ambassador Quainton looking into the situation from that point of view? Is he involved in this in any way?

A Ambassador Quainton's office has been kept informed of all of this situation. Up until this point his office has not concluded that it involved a situation of that nature. He has not come to the same conclusion that you have apparently.

q Are you investigating the group called "The East" that moved from Brooklyn, New York, at the same time under exactly similar conditions to Guyana also under pressure of the same individuals whose letters were referenced in the Times and the Institute for Policy Studies which was pressuring the Guyanese Government to open up the territory to these various organizations?

Are you familiar with "The East"?

A Let me say that we are not -- we, the United States Government -- are not investigating any particular groups in Guyana. The Guyanese have an investigation, the FBI has an investigation because of the murder and attacks on certain protected persons.

But we are not conducting some widespread investigation of a situation in Guyana or various groups there. We are concentrating on a more limited basis, as are the Guyanese, on what is rather obviously a tremendous calamity and obvious crimes clearly presented.

Q Mr. Bushnell, could you respond to the fact that Congressman Zablocki has written to the Secretary to request further information about what the Department knew, when it knew it, whether or not the Consular Officers did enough, the whole aspect of an investigation into what preceded and possibly could have anticipated what happened down there?

A Yes. I have seen the letter which Congressman Zablocki has sent to the Secretary. We have already started this morning to prepare the answer to the very extensive questions in that letter. It will provide the basis of the encyclopedia, I suspect, on this issue. It will take time to answer these questions. We hope to make the deadline, which is a fairly early deadline, that the Congressman has suggested we make. Certainly we will have at least an initial submission. There may be some pieces of it that will require a little bit more time. And we will provide all the information that has been requested in that letter.

I don't have, on this Task Force and appearing before you here, the feeling that we have anything to cover up, so we are quite prepared to make available all the information.

I myself have been very impressed, and I think the sort of information that I have been giving here, in terms of the work that our Consular Officers in Guyana have done, that we have devoted a great deal more time and attention and effort to this group of American citizens living overseas than to almost any other group of American citizens living overseas reflecting the concerns and the unusual circumstances of this case.

But this is a voluminous record in our file, and we would draw on that to answer all of the questions which the Committee has put to us.

Q Can I follow on that, please? Can you say at this time whether you still feel that the State Department was responsive enough to the relatives at those earlier points?

A I am sure that there were various times when it would have been nice in a humane sense to have done more for the relatives that were concerned, in retrospect clearly legitimately concerned. And on that balance we would always like to serve the American people better. Given our own limitations of budget and personnel and so forth, there are limits to what we can do.

It would have been nice to do more.

On the other side of that equation, let me say that we have done much more for this group of concerned Americans in terms of spending time and effort and State Department funds and so dorth than dor almost any other group that I can think of. So, in that sense, relatively speaking we have done an awful lot. In an absolute sense there are certainly individual aspects which it would have been nice to do more.

Q John, you said the file was voluminous on this. I assume that there is a lot of correspondence, there are MEMCONs from the Embassy and so on, which I presume would be of an unclassified nature.

Would these be available for inspection or would they be available under the Freedom of Information Act, so that we could actually see the reports in the files of the Department about what came out on this group out of Guyana? And specifically was there any correspondence to the Department from Reverend Jim Jones himself?

A Your first question, certainly this is available in the Freedom of Information Act. We look at the availability in the Freedom of Information Act as we would anything else; and I assume that, given the attention to this, we will have a good deal of Freedom of Information work.

I do not myseld -- but I have not spent the many hours in these files that some of our other people have -- recall any communication from the Reverend Jones himself. But I certainly would not want to say that there are not communications in that from him. There may well be.

Q Thank you.

(At 12:45 p.m. the special briefing concluded)